Sightings of Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor* in the far north of Cameroon

Ralph Buij

Observations de Faucons concolores *Falco concolor* dans l'extrême nord du Cameroun. Des observations sont rapportées d'au moins six Faucons concolores *Falco concolor* immatures dans l'extrême nord du Cameroun, en mai et juillet 2010. Les faucons attrapaient des insectes pendant et après des orages saisonniers. Les données pour cette espèce en Afrique de l'Ouest sont très rares. L'auteur suggère que certains Faucons concolores traversent l'Afrique de l'Ouest et centrale en route vers leurs aires de reproduction, comme le Faucon d'Éléonore *F. eleonorae*. En été, les jeunes Faucons concolores peuvent être particulièrement attirés par les pluies en Afrique de l'Ouest.

Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor* is considered a rare Palearctic vagrant to western Africa (Borrow & Demey 2001). Confirmed records exist for eastern Chad in May and June. In addition, four to five Sooty Falcons were observed at several locations in and around the northern Aïr Mountains in Niger, between July and September; at least one was in its second calendar year (NiBDaB 2010). These constitute the only summer records for the region. The following describes observations made by the author of Sooty Falcons in northernmost Cameroon in May and July 2010.

On 1 May 2010, I photographed a Sooty Falcon south of the village of Rhumsiki in the Kapsiki Mountains (10°40'N 13°56'E; 1,100 m; Fig. 1). Temperature was 35°C with clear skies; the first seasonal rains had fallen several days earlier. The falcon was hawking insects at 13.27 hrs at 150–200 m above ground and moved off north-west. Its plumage was uniform bluish grey, including the flight feathers; the cere and feet were yellow. The ochre cheeks and chin and the dark moustachial indicate the bird was probably in its third calendar-year, or perhaps older (Forsman 1999). The habitat consisted of undulating hills and rocky outcrops with cultivation, *Combretum* and *Terminalia* shrubland and scattered villages. Several Eurasian Hobbies *F. subbuteo* were observed hawking insects in the same area that day.

Between 7 and 28 July 2010, I observed at least five Sooty Falcons near the village of Waza, south of Lake Chad and close to Waza National Park in northern Cameroon (11°40'N 14°57'E; 300 m). Photographs of at least four different individuals indicated they had barred, i.e. juvenile-type, flight feathers and relatively short wings (especially the 'hand'), suggesting they were in their second calendar-year (Forsman 1999). All observations were made near or from three granite outcrops, which constitute the only higher ground in this relatively flat area and which rise to 400–500 m. Surrounding habitat consists of seasonally flooded grassy plains, interspersed by cultivation (millet, sorghum), small villages, and higher lying *Sclerocarya birrea* and *Anogeissus leiocarpus* tree savanna, *Combretum* and *Terminalia* shrubs, and stands of *Hyphaena thebaica*. *Acacia seyal* tree savanna on black clay soils is saturated with water in the rainy season. Rainfall (May–September) is irregular with an annual mean of 700 mm. From June, the area received above average rainfall, with rains at least every 2–3 days continuing into July. As a result, much of the surrounding grassy plains were permanently inundated.

On 7 July, two Sooty Falcons were hawking insects and 'playfully' chasing each other above the rocky outcrops. They were seen around 17.00 hrs in overcast conditions after a day of heavy rain. Other raptors simultaneously hawking insects above the outcrops included several juvenile Lanner Falcons *F. biarmicus*, two African Hobbies *F. cuvierii* and 12 Fox Kestrels *F. alopex*. On 16–18 July, at least two Sooty Falcons were seen infrequently at the same location, mostly in the afternoon, at 16.30–18.30 hrs, when they were hawking insects together around the outcrops (Fig. 2). Once, a Sooty Falcon was seen at 07.34 hrs. On 19 July, a group of five Sooty Falcons were hawking insects together at 16.35 hrs, after a day of heavy rain.

On 24–25 July, up to three Sooty Falcons were seen together from the highest rocky outcrop in the area (500 m), which was visited for the

Figure 1. Third calendar-year or older Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*,13 km south of Rhumsiki, Cameroon, 1 May 2010. Note long wings and uniform flight feathers (Ralph Buij)

Faucon concolore *Falco concolor* de troisième année ou plus,13 km au sud de Rhumsiki, Cameroun, 1 mai 2010. Noter les longues ailes et les rémiges uniformes (Ralph Buij)

Figure 2. Second calendar-year Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*; the mantle, rump and head feathers have been moulted, but note the retained juvenile upperwing-coverts, remiges and rectrices, Waza, Cameroon, 17 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Faucon concolore *Falco concolor* de deuxième année ; les plumes du manteau, du croupion et de la tête ont été muées, mais noter les couvertures alaires, rémiges et rectrices juvéniles, Waza, Cameroun, 17 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Figure 3. Second calendar-year Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor* stooping at a dragonfly, Waza, Cameroon, 24 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Faucon concolore *Falco concolor* de deuxième année piquant vers une libellule, Waza, Cameroun, 24 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Figure 4. Second calendar-year Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*; the same individual as in Fig. 3, hawking insects above a rocky outcrop, Waza, Cameroon, 24 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Faucon concolore *Falco concolor* de deuxième année ; le même individu de la Fig. 3, chassant des insectes au-dessus d'un affleurement rocheux, Waza, Cameroun, 24 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

entire day on both dates (Figs. 3–9). A Sooty Falcon appeared around 14.30 hrs on 24 July, in fine weather coinciding with the development of a distant rainstorm. It was hawking insects at very close range, pursuing prey in rapid flight among the boulders at the top of the hill, and dismembering and consuming insects in flight. Prey included dragonflies and alate termites, possibly also locusts. It often stooped at great speed from 50–70 m up, twice at dragonflies. Other raptors attracted to the insect food included two African Hobbies, a single Grey Kestrel *F. ardosiaceus* and several Lanner Falcons and Fox Kestrels. After 20 minutes, the Sooty Falcon flew

Figure 5. Second calendar-year Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*; the moult of the body feathers is less advanced than in the bird depicted in Figs. 3–4, Waza, Cameroon, 24 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Faucon concolore *Falco concolor* de deuxième année ; la mue des plumes du corps est moins avancée que chez l'oiseau des Figs. 3–4, Waza, Cameroun, 24 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Figure 6. Second calendar-year Sooty Falcons *Falco concolor* 'playfully' chasing each other, Waza, Cameroon, 24 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Faucons concolores *Falco concolor* de deuxième année se poursuivant apparemment pour jouer, Waza, Cameroun, 24 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Figure 7. Second calendar-year Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*, Waza, Cameroon, 24 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Faucon concolore *Falco concolor* de deuxième année, Waza, Cameroun, 24 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Figure 8. Second calendar-year Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor*, Waza, Cameroon, 25 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Faucon concolore *Falco concolor* de deuxième année, Waza, Cameroun, 25 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

off in the direction of the rainstorm. Two more Sooty Falcons appeared 30 minutes later and after some time spent hawking insects near the top of the hill, also moved off in the direction of the storm. Three Sooty Falcons—probably the same individuals—were seen higher up at 16.00 hrs, hawking insects in the rain, by which time other falcons had ceased their hunting activities. Three Sooty Falcons were again seen together at the same location on 25 July, around 13.00 hrs, in light rain. After several minutes they moved off to forage above the distant flooded grasslands.

The last observation of a Sooty Falcon was made on 28 July at 15.20 hrs; this bird was seen only briefly after it had started raining. No further visits were made to the area after 28 July.

Discussion

Despite five years of intensive raptor studies by myself and various year-round bird surveys by others during the past 20 years, these are the first observations of Sooty Falcons in Cameroon. Thiollay (1977) did not observe the species during his seven years of raptor studies between

Figure 9. Sooty Falcon *Falco concolor* habitat, a rocky outcrop of 500 m elevation in otherwise flat terrain; the falcons chased insects among the boulders and also visited the distant inundated grasslands, Waza, Cameroon, 24 July 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Habitat du Faucon concolore *Falco concolor*, un affleurement rocheux de 500 m de haut au milieu d'un terrain par ailleurs plat ; les faucons chassaient les insectes parmi les rochers et se rendaient également vers les prairies inondées lointaines, Waza, Cameroun, 24 juillet 2010 (Ralph Buij)

Mauritania and Cameroon. The Sooty Falcons in Niger were only recorded in one out of 12 years of bird studies, following heavy rains which resulted in a superabundance of locusts (J. Newby pers. comm.). Sooty Falcons may only visit western Africa infrequently and perhaps only when heavy rains trigger a rich supply of food. Their frequency of occurrence may be under-estimated, however, due to the scarcity of observers.

It is important to note, in this respect, the paucity of observations of the ecologically similar Eleonora's Falcon *F. eleonorae* in western Africa. Intensive raptor surveys resulted in a single observation of Eleonora's Falcon in northern Cameroon (RB pers. obs.) and another in the south (Hivekovics & Palatitz 1998), while there are only three records elsewhere in the region: single black-morph individuals at the Banc d'Arguin, north-west Mauritania, in November and January (Lamarche 1988, Meininger *et al.* 1990), and a bird video-taped in Mount Peko National Park, Côte d'Ivoire, in March (G. Rondeau *in Bull. ABC* 8: 147). Recent satellite transmitter studies have revealed, however, that West and Central Africa—especially Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic and Congo-Kinshasa—are routinely crossed by Eleonora's Falcons en route to and from their breeding grounds in the western Mediterranean (Gschweng *et al.* 2008, Lopez-Lopez *et al.* 2010). The third calendar-year Sooty Falcon seen in May in northern Cameroon was perhaps following a similar migratory route, although it was slightly west of the expected flight path, given the location of the westernmost known breeding grounds of Sooty Falcons in eastern Libya.

The Eleonora's Falcon satellite studies revealed the over-summering of juvenile Eleonora's Falcons on the African continent, away from the breeding grounds (Gschweng *et al.* 2008). The very low proportion of subadult Sooty Falcons at some breeding colonies, such as in Oman (M. McGrady *in litt.* 2010), suggests young Sooty Falcons also summer away from their breeding colonies. Similar to Eleonora's, summering Sooty Falcons may range widely on the African continent, tracking strong rains and the superabundance of prey that they bring. Observations of Sooty Falcons in eastern and southern Africa, including Madagascar, during July–October are extremely rare; only a handful were reported from Tanzania during this period, some of which may have been misidentified Grey Kestrels (N. Baker *in litt.* 2010). The Sooty Falcons observed in northern Cameroon in July, and in Niger in July–August suggest that summering Sooty Falcons may be particularly attracted to good rains in this part of Africa.

Acknowledgements

This study was financially and logistically supported by the Institute of Environmental Sciences (CML) of the University of Leiden, the Netherlands, through its collaborative programme with the University of the Dschang, Cameroon, at the Centre for Environment and Development Studies in Cameroon (CEDC). Nik Borrow, Ron Demey and Guy Kirwan provided helpful comments on the submitted version of the manuscript.

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Received 25 August 2010; revision accepted 25 October 2010.

An attack by a Hoopoe *Upupa epops* on a Guttural Toad *Amietophrynus gutturalis*

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Une attaque d'une Huppe fasciée *Upupa epops* sur un Crapaud guttural *Amietophrynus gutturalis*. Le 20 novembre 2008, une Huppe fasciée *Upupa epops* a été observée donnant des coups de bec violents à un Crapaud guttural *Amietophrynus gutturalis* adulte sur la pelouse d'un jardin urbain à Springs, Gauteng, Afrique du Sud. Le crapaud était clairement mort depuis peu, peut-être à cause de l'attaque de la Huppe. Ceci semble être la première donnée concernant une Huppe fasciée attaquant un Crapaud guttural.

On 20 November 2008, DS noticed a Hoopoe *Upupa epops* pecking vigorously at a relatively large object *c.*10 m from him on his lawn in Springs, east of Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa. He went into the house to retrieve his camera, and when he returned the Hoopoe was foraging a short distance from the object, which appeared to be an anuran. The Hoopoe suddenly returned to the motionless anuran and pecked at its head and body quite vigorously (Figs. 1–2) for the next two minutes, after which it resumed foraging for a short period before flying away. Examination of the anuran (Fig. 3) revealed that it was a Guttural Toad *Amietophrynus gutturalis*, one of the commonest anurans in southern Africa, which is often found near buildings in towns and suburbs (Channing 2001). The animal died very recently, possibly as a result of the Hoopoe's attack, as its blood had not yet coagulated and *rigor mortis* had not yet set in.

It is unclear why the Hoopoe pecked at the toad. No other Hoopoes were observed in the immediate vicinity, and no nest holes were found in the garden, so it was unlikely a defensive action. Hoopoes feed primarily on large insects, their larvae and pupae, and other invertebrates, and the species occasionally hawks flying termites, although they are also known to take small vertebrates, such as lizards, snakes and frogs (Krištín 2001, Hockey *et al.* 2005). However, due to the toad's size (snout–vent length *c.*7 cm), it seems unlikely that the animal would